

Second Place Scholarship Winner

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Women, Solid

Nineteen: the number of married women that boarded the *Mayflower* to cross the treacherous Atlantic. This meager number was doomed to dwindle even more before the end of the first Pilgrims' trials, whittled down by disease and hardships until only four remained for what would become known as the First Thanksgiving in 1621. Yet without the contributions and sacrifices of its women, Plymouth Colony would surely have perished long before the relief of a substantial harvest.

In modern times, it is difficult to imagine the immense disadvantages attached to being a woman in the early 1600's. Both unmarried and married women had few rights, as the Pilgrims believed that women had been created by God strictly for the benefit of men. Young girls received minimal education: they were taught how to read, but not how to write. The sole avenue for women to gain any semblance of true personhood in the eyes of the community and the law was to become widowed. By becoming the heads of their families by default, widows were allowed to handle money, land, and make significant decisions, whether for themselves or their children (Neuzil). Pilgrim women neither protested nor rebelled against these gender roles, as the majority believed devoutly in God's divine power and His wish for their obedience.

Women are essential for population growth, and Plymouth Colony was no exception. The task of childbirth, still substantially difficult today, was highly dangerous due to the lack of medical knowledge and proper supplies. Pregnancy and delivery put both mother and baby at high risk of death in civilized places like English towns, let alone out in the open ocean and untamed wilds of the New World. Showing fearless mettle, three women, Susanna White, Mary Allerton, and Elizabeth Hopkins, boarded the *Mayflower* over six months pregnant, paving the way for centuries of descendants (McLean).

Despite their lack of rights and education relative to the men of the *Mayflower*, it was the Pilgrim women who formed a hidden infrastructure that kept the ship at a functional capacity. Women did not serve on the crew of the *Mayflower*, as hard labor and decision-making were strictly male jobs. Instead, they stayed below decks, caring for their families and, as the voyage wore on, the sick and dying. With their wives taking the majority of the exposure to the contagion of pneumonia and various other diseases by nursing those affected, fewer men with essential navigational skills had to risk debilitating illness. The death of those with the knowledge of how to find the Americas could have left the

Mayflower drifting in the middle of the Atlantic, a ghost ship.

Upon their arrival at what is now Cape Cod, Massachusetts, conditions for the Pilgrims worsened. It was November of 1620, and the men were struggling to construct enough shelters before the harsh winter set in. Once again, it fell upon the women to care for the sick, a number increasing daily. Infectious illness ravaged the new colony, leaving half of the pilgrims dead by spring. Women, on the front lines of the battle against contagion, were impacted the most. Only four adult females were left alive: Eleanor Billington, Elizabeth Hopkins, Mary Brewster, and Susanna White (McLean).

Fifty-three pilgrims survived the first winter and lived until the harvest season of 1621. Fourteen of them were female, a small but significant number. Despite their firm placement in the role of second-class citizens, the women of Plymouth ensured the survival of the colony.

Wives and daughters were fallen back upon in times of disease and counted on to soften the impact of illness on the young settlement. The women of the *Mayflower* were ready and willing to put their lives on the line for what they believed in: a new life in America. Behind the intrepid men of Plymouth stood the women: solid, steady, selfless, and paying the ultimate price for the survival of those they loved.